



MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA INCORPORATED

**GAY & LESBIAN POLICY GUIDELINES
FOR MUSEUM PROGRAMS AND PRACTICE**

GAY & LESBIAN POLICY GUIDELINES

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INTRODUCTION

Museums across Australia collect and display objects and interpret culture. Until very recent times, the terms of reference for these collections largely reflected the dominant cultural norms of a non representative society. However, with the arrival of a large immigrant community into Australia since the end of the Second World War, the norms for interpretation and collection of our society have been stirred and have begun to dissolve into a new expression that reflects the culturally diverse nature of Australian society.

In December 1993, CAMA launched *Previous Possessions, New Obligations: Policies for Museums Australia and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. This policy intends to forge new partnerships in Australia between museums and the first peoples of Australia.

At the time of the launch of *Previous Possessions, New Obligations*, the plenum session of the last CAMA conference enjoined the interim board of the soon to be established Museums Australia to prepare similar policies on museum programs and practice for the gay and lesbian communities and women. These policies are to operate within a framework that accepts difference and diversity as a defining factor of the Australian experience.

The gay and lesbian policy was seen as an essential way for museums in Australia to address the needs of people who have also been traditionally marginalised by the dominant culture. Historically, their stories and cultural history have been largely ignored, forgotten or repressed but with growing self-identification, the gay and lesbian communities are now seen as an important part of the culturally diverse matrix of Australian society.

For some in the museum profession, the issues tackled by the policy will not be new but for many they will represent a first encounter. The policy is aimed at those museum professionals who are seeking to position themselves and their institutions in a culturally diverse nation.

The group which worked on this policy represented a range of museum professionals from small and large institutions from around the states and territories. The policy has been widely circulated within Museums Australia, related arts organisations, the museum profession and the gay and lesbian communities.

As with all specific policies, this document should be read in addition to those existing collection related policies pertinent to each institution. In general, this policy could also be one small part of a general policy on difference or diversity. However, until such time, this current policy initiative is needed to address historic and current inconsistencies in the treatment of gay and lesbian communities by museums.

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Furthermore, for the sake of convenience, the term 'gay and lesbian communities' is used within the policy. This should be read throughout to be inclusive of the bisexual and transsexual communities, as they form part of what is usefully described as coalition or queer politics. This also reflects that the terminology of the policy is one that accepts self definition and the need to develop interrelationships between communities of interest and between those communities and museums. Simply stated, the policy expounds principles of respect for and appreciation of diversity.

The policy also values the role and importance of the museum in society and the positive effect that the frank acceptance of gay and lesbian issues and communities by museums may have on the rest of society. The policy does not seek to force museums to convince their public of a particular point of view, however, it is one that will help museum professionals to question current museum practices and assumptions. The policy should therefore be regarded as an invitation to commence a dialogue with the gay and lesbian communities, not as prescriptive, turgid or dictatorial.

One of the key elements of the policy recognises that dialogue and liaison with gay and lesbian communities is an important part of the process of change. The policy also recognises that not all museums can appoint gay and lesbian advisers as a general matter of resource. It does not expect that all museums can or will fulfil all of the recommendations in the policy. Some smaller museums may find that a liaison person from the local gay and/or lesbian community is the best that they can manage or that the particular person charged with cultural diversity in their museum will be the point of contact. The policy recognises change can be slow and difficult, but that the process of understanding the issues involved is the most important part of this change. The recommendations are there as the final point in a process and are benchmarks that should be aimed at over a period of time where circumstances and resources permit.

Finally, it is important to note that some of the larger institutions have begun to move down the path of communication and dialogue with the gay and lesbian communities. These approaches are recognised and accepted by the policy group as important steps towards an attitude of change within Australian museums. It is towards this ongoing dialogue that Museums Australia commends this policy.

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PREAMBLE

Stories of people struggling towards accepting, valuing and understanding themselves as lesbian and gay generally share one powerful motif - that each thought they were alone, the only one. On reaching an understanding of themselves as lesbian or gay, they then want to take their place in their community, to learn of their history, their culture, their sexualities, and of the lives of those who went before them.

Gay and lesbian people often experience a frightening isolation which results from the systematic exclusion of gay and lesbian history and culture from the public record. A visit to a museum would provide no information on the fortunes, the contributions to politics, the arts, commerce, sport, research, scholarship, trade, social justice or the daily lives of the huge numbers of Australians who have been lesbian and gay. There is no information to counterbalance the stereotypes found in the media, in schoolyard jokes, in family prejudices and ignorance. Nor does the museum provide any information on the ways in which lesbian and gay Australians have been and continue to be, persecuted, assaulted and murdered, discriminated against and vilified and how that violence has been dealt with.

The absence of lesbian and gay culture, history and concerns from the museum is a powerful way of ensuring that each woman and man will continue to make that painful journey to a sexual identity alone and often ashamed; will continue to be deprived of a rich and satisfying history; and will continue to feel the exclusion and marginalisation that characterises Australian society today.

There are, however, a number of other reasons for Museums Australia to develop a policy which will ensure that lesbian and gay interests are represented within the museum's collections, educational programs and public displays.

1. Equity

It is illegal in most states to discriminate against individuals and groups on the grounds of sexuality. This and related matters are now established as part of the international human rights debate and will undoubtedly become more important at a local level.

In addition, Australian museums are educational institutions in receipt of millions of taxpayers' dollars. As taxpayers, gay and lesbian Australians are entitled to see their interests and their lives appear within the museums they help to fund.

2. Audience

While it is generally accepted that at least ten per cent of those taxpayers are gay and lesbian, many more people have had important emotional and erotic relations with a same sex partner, and even more have their lives touched by the knowledge that kith, kin and friends are gay. If every gay man and lesbian has an average of two parents and two siblings, and many have at least one child, then for every gay person there are four or five closely connected others with an intimate interest in their lives. Therefore, the gay interested population amounts to a large part of a society governed by a pervasive heterosexual mythology that is at odds with reality. Gay and lesbian lives are not singular, not 10%, not abnormal, not a minority.

The audience for public exhibitions and displays which discuss and present gay and lesbian history and culture, for exhibitions showing the ways in which western culture has been shaped and developed by gays and lesbians, and which discuss the social issues circulating around homophobia and sexuality is potentially very large.

3. Educational

The absence of lesbian and gay history and culture from museum records and display constitutes a substantial falsification of the historical record and perpetuates dysfunctional mythologies of heterosexuality as the norm.

4. Cultural Diversity

Sexuality, along with many other factors, is an element of cultural diversity. The mission statements written into museum charters which guarantee the representation of cultural diversity in the collections, education programs and displays of the museum cannot be met successfully until lesbian and gay cultures and histories are included and integrated.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Traditionally, museums have represented the dominant culture and a singular view, with occasional presentations of the exotically different.

This policy seeks to encourage museums to address social, political and cultural issues of gay and lesbian identities as elements of the manifold and complex interrelationships that constitute contemporary Australian society. Social and legal recognition of gays and lesbians should be reflected in the programs of our cultural institutions. Museums must recognise and represent diverse sexualities and the significance of gay and lesbian cultures as an integral part of society.

Museums have a role and a responsibility to reflect and develop social attitudes, including revising incorrect and discriminatory views of the past. If museums do not respect that role, they compromise their public and their credibility.

COLLECTIONS AND PROGRAMS

Museums should reflect the cultural diversity and complexity of the population which they represent through collections, research, exhibitions and public programs.

Gays and lesbians are a significant part of that population.

The cultural complexity and diversity of society generally also exists within gay and lesbian communities and should be recognised.

1. Collection Development

Acquisition, disposal and access to collections will take into account, or incorporate as appropriate, the following criteria in regard to material from or pertinent to gay or lesbian sources:

Sensitivity to the rights of the individual should be taken into account because of the discrimination, violence and persecution to which gays and lesbians have been and continue to be subjected:

- acquisition, disposal and access to collections will take into account that individual gay men and lesbians may not wish to be publicly identified. In keeping with Privacy Legislation, museums should disclose the intended and possible use of a person's work or material that may reveal details of their sexuality.
- where appropriate, the museum should establish formal agreements with individuals who request that their representation within a public collection exclude all reference to their sexuality. Such an agreement should consider special circumstances, time frames and levels of access but generally the agreement should lapse on the death of the individual concerned.

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- in the case of the work of a deceased person, museums should refuse acquisitions with caveats attached which constrain or prohibit discussion of homosexuality in relation to the work. As is standard practice, museums should avoid acquisitions that compromise the institution's ability to meet its public obligations.
- with regard to video, film or photographic documentation of individuals in a private but identifiable gay or lesbian context (including Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parties, bars and other community gatherings), it will be assumed to be a condition of acquisition that the individuals represented have given their consent for the public use of this documentation.

Identity - the identity of an object from the perspectives of both the maker, the gay and lesbian communities and the wider community. In particular:

- when an openly gay or lesbian individual is represented or is being considered for representation within a public collection, it will be documented within that collection and supporting records.
- in considering the acquisition of material produced by an individual who is openly gay or lesbian, material which is explicitly gay or lesbian will not be excluded on this basis alone.
- the significance of the gay and lesbian movement as a political force within Australia, should be represented in appropriate public collections.

Diversity - there is no single gay and lesbian community. Like others in the community, gay men and lesbians may identify around common issues, without assuming a common identity. The diversity of the gay and lesbian communities should always be considered when collecting information about objects pertinent to those communities. Objects which have a particular meaning to one group may have a very different meaning to another.

Sexually explicit material - as with all types of sexually explicit material, the local legal guidelines for such use shall be applied. The inclusion of such material, and possible general warnings should be discussed with the producers of the material or representatives of the gay and lesbian communities of that state or territory.

2. Research

Museums should encourage research by gay and lesbian communities on their collections.

In dealing with collections in general, the principle that there is a diversity of interests will prevail.

3. Exhibitions and Other Public Programs

Museums conduct a wide range of public programs through which they communicate with a wider public. Public programs include exhibitions, education activities and publications in all media. Public programs should also ensure co-operation by museums with the gay and lesbian communities.

Museums should actively promote understanding, acceptance and tolerance of all the communities of Australia.

Museums should actively involve gay and lesbian communities in their public programs and should consult with them on the manner in which relevant items from the collections are used. Consultation can be achieved in a number of ways; directly with a staff member with responsibility for liaison with the lesbian and gay communities, or by developing a special consultative group from the local gay and lesbian communities that provide ongoing occasional advice to the museum.

POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN GAY MEN AND LESBIANS

Despite the powerful stereotypes of gays and lesbians that persist very real differences exist between and within gay and lesbian communities. These differences may pertain to personal identity, gender, sexual practice, political activism, law reform and health (as evidenced in the work of ACTUP, Queer Nation and the various gay and lesbian lobby groups, and issues relating to outing and outness, Coalition policies, State and Federal legislation, EEO, affirmative action and anti-vilification).

Many of the differences are sensitive points of demarcation and should be managed carefully by the museum. Individual and collective responses from gay and lesbian communities can produce art and artefacts which are relevant to museum collections and programs and must be represented if a balanced view of society and culture is to be achieved.

Individual differences must also be recognised by museums in their representation of cultural material. No typical gay man or lesbian exists. While individuals may identify with a gay and/or lesbian community or sub-culture, this is not the case for every gay man and lesbian.

Museums, through their policies and programs, should actively:

- challenge stereotypical representations of gay men and lesbians.
- seek to represent the diversity of gay and lesbian communities.
- seek advice from relevant individuals and community groups in the documentation and presentation of gay and lesbian art and artefacts.

MUSEUMS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITIES

Lesbian and gay communities and individuals are part of Australian society, contributing significantly to the wider community as well as having their own history and identity. That history, identity and contribution should be represented in the collections and exhibitions of museums.

Museums should actively seek to establish and develop successful relationships with lesbian and gay communities by recognising the racial, cultural, social, economic and political diversity within these communities.

Building a successful relationship, through regular consultation with lesbian and gay communities would allow museums to more accurately reflect the cultural diversity and complexity of Australian society and more accurately represent these communities in their collections.

The establishment of successful relationships between museums and gay and lesbian communities will facilitate greater inter-community understanding.

This understanding and acknowledgment of the lesbian and gay communities within Australian society can be developed and expressed in a number of ways such as:

- specific projects/exhibitions relating to a particular community within the lesbian and gay communities.
- inclusion of lesbian and gay communities concerns within broader projects/exhibitions.
- access to collections for lesbian and gay communities

Museums should actively develop their lesbian and gay collections in consultation with gay and lesbian communities and individuals. As with cultural material from other communities or sub-groups with, museums should work towards gay and lesbian collections as discrete entities within the general collection.

As mentioned above, museums should, if possible, appoint a member of staff to act as a lesbian and gay liaison officer. This staff member would liaise between the museum and the gay and lesbian communities and assist members of these communities to gain access to relevant aspects of the museum's collection. A liaison officer may be imperative if the museum is intending to produce a particular project with gay and lesbian content.

ACCURACY AND SIGNIFICANCE

A key objective of museums is to relate the full and often changing significance of objects and cultures in their construction of knowledge. Sub-groups of the community may respond positively to their acknowledgment within mainstream institutions and establish lasting connections if involved in museum practice. Mainstream museum practice has frequently ignored gay and lesbian histories within collected material culture, yet these can be of significance and value to everyone. This policy therefore emphasises the following:

- museums should follow professional contemporary practice in the interpretation and presentation of gay and lesbian histories within material culture.
- the presentation of information should not be erratic or incomplete. Its delivery should be balanced. This is not asking museums to advocate homosexuality. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that museums have perpetuated a cultural conspiracy that has omitted the existence of different sexualities from the mainstream vision of society. Such inaccuracies should be corrected and avoided in future. The process of correction may well entail presenting a range of opinion about homosexuality in much the same way as history has been reviewed in recent years to include the existence and achievements of women.

EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT

Senior museum management, directors and boards of management, have the greatest influence over the implementation of a gay and lesbian policy for Australia's museums as they have overall responsibility for their institutions. Prejudice, conservatism and ignorance, as well as workload, may be obstacles to changing museum culture.

Museum managers should ensure the collecting, presentation and personnel policies and practices of their institutions are in accord with this policy. It is their responsibility to advocate the policy to their boards and colleagues. This requirement exists in a context of increasing pressure to stay abreast of complex legal and social obligations.

Management of museums, as with other public sector instrumentalities, is usually guided by Equal Employment Opportunity legislation. Issues of gender, race, nationality, language, age and cultural difference have largely been addressed by museums and galleries. However, relatively few, if any, individual museum policies, or state and federal legislation specifically mention sexuality within personnel guidelines and practices, or within their broader program (acquisition and presentation) policies. Nonetheless, issues of sexuality are, at least, tacitly covered in all legislation and this should be reflected in museum policies.

This section of the policy considers the issues of museum personnel management and development in detail. Specialist agencies exist within each State and territory to guide on local and national legal requirements regarding equity and discrimination. All museums should avail themselves of these services.

Personnel Policies and Practices.

- Ensure that local EEO policies and programs specifically cover gay and lesbian workers in the museum or gallery workplace.
- Staff induction, training and development programs should include courses that increase staff understanding of issues to do with sexuality and difference, especially in light of the role of museums in recording, analysing and interpreting the society in which we live.
- Staff recruitment guidelines and procedures need to ensure that covert prejudice does not occur. This may mean modification to selection criteria to specifically ask interviewers and managers to state that they have not disadvantaged applicants on the basis of sexuality (possibly as one of a number of anti-discrimination measures).
- Grievance and disciplinary provisions need also to specially address discrimination against gay and lesbian people.
- Museums should develop a specific HIV/AIDS policy in accordance with nationally accepted standards.
- Museums Australia should encourage the requisite for art gallery management and museum studies courses to explain and promote this policy as part of their programs.
- Museum managers should ensure that they understand local laws regarding discrimination and those with gay and lesbian concerns.
- Museums Australia and individual museums should lobby for the extension of spouse and superannuation entitlements, rights and benefits to include lesbian and gay relationships.

STAFF EMPLOYMENT, TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Staff knowledge of many issues depends on appropriate training and professional development. Awareness of, and sensitivity to, the issues contained in this policy are no exception.

Museums have a substantial responsibility in terms of staff training across all areas of museum activity. This policy recognises that there are unique and important issues concerning gay men and lesbians with particular relevance to museums practice.

Employment

Consideration of equality of opportunity should be part of all museum activities including employment and training. All museums should abide by an equal employment opportunity policy that specifically mentions sexual orientation..

- Museums should ensure equal employment opportunity to all qualified persons and prohibit discrimination against any staff member or applicant for employment, transfer or promotion, because of political affiliation, race, colour, religion, sex, social origin, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy, age, physical or mental disability.

Training and Professional Development

Museum staff need to be aware of the issues concerning gay men and lesbians on a number of levels, in particular, in the workplace and in the context of information presented through public programs.

Issues relevant to gay men and lesbians can often be addressed in the context of other issues of importance in the work place such as sexual and racial discrimination. Museum staff training and development programs should promote an holistic view of cultural diversity including gay and lesbian cultures.

- Museum staff induction, training and development programs will include courses that offer staff understanding of issues of cultural diversity, including lesbian and gay cultures.

When a museum undertakes a particular public program with relevance to the gay and lesbian communities it may experience misunderstanding and prejudice from staff as well as from the public. Museums should use these opportunities to raise staff awareness of the issues considered within the program..

- When undertaking a specific public program targeted to gay and lesbian communities museums will undertake staff training, at all levels, to develop awareness of the issues raised by the program.